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A FEMINIST FAIRY TALE

BLUEBEARD

METAPHROG

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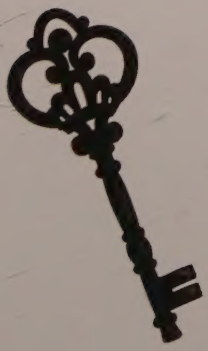
BLUEBEARD

by

METAPHROG



PAPERCUTZ
NEW YORK

BLUEBEARD

By Metaphrog

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Jim Salicrup

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ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL

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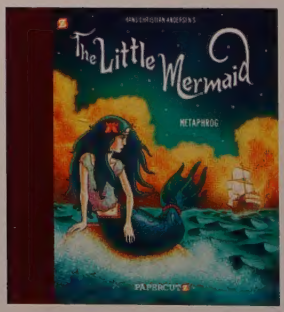
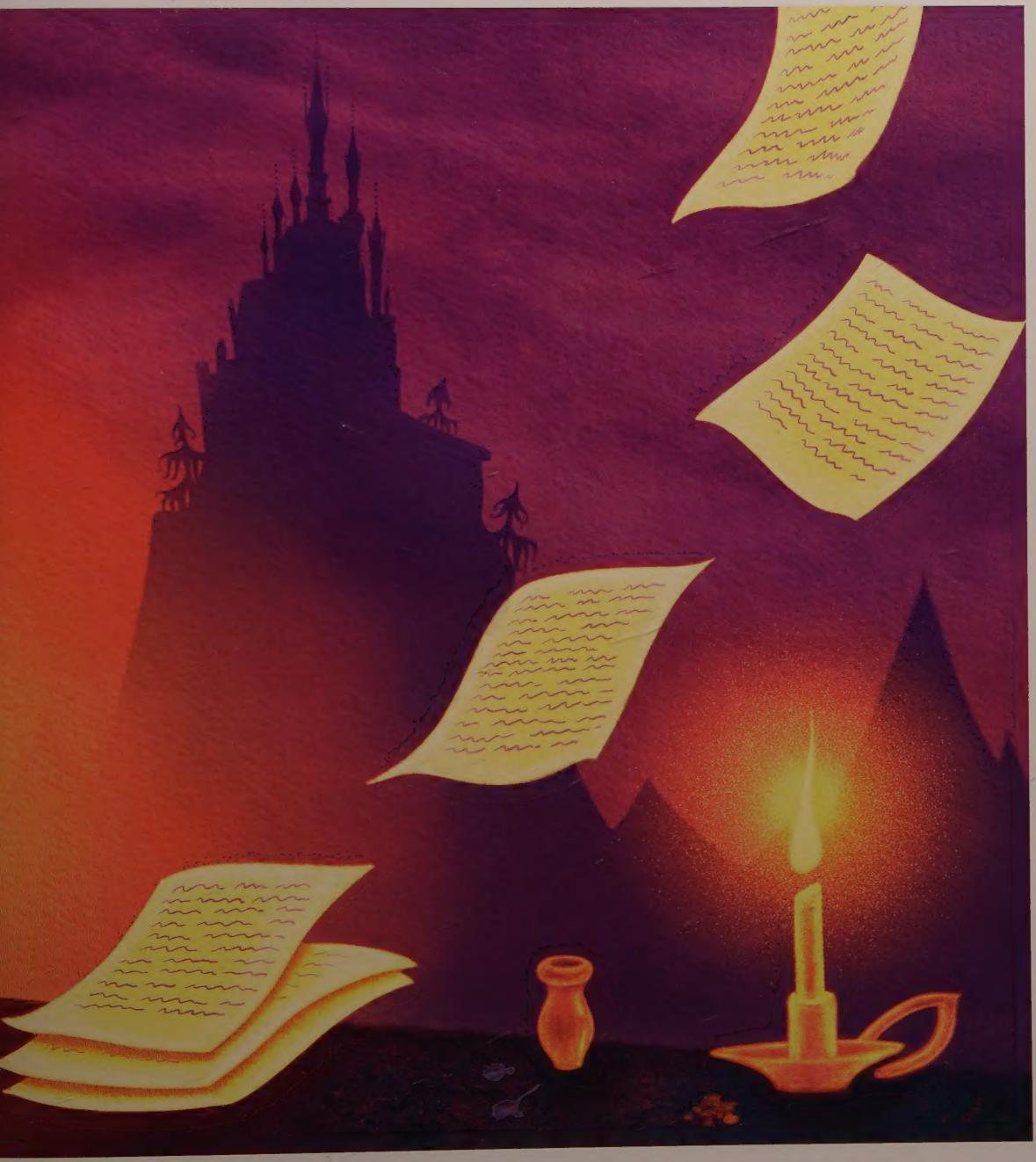


THE SUMMER I TURNED EIGHTEEN WAS A STRANGE SUMMER.
IT WAS THE SUMMER THAT WOULD DECIDE MY FATE.
e summer I wo
trange,
was the
ould

OF COURSE I'D HEARD RUMORS OF THE MAN WITH MANY FINE TOWN HOUSES AND COUNTRY HOUSES...
... AND THE INCREDIBLE BLUE BEARD.
STILL HIS NAME WAS SHROUDED IN MYSTERY.



BLUEBEARD

by

METAPHROG

EVERYONE LOOKED UP TO BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE...
... SET AS IT WAS, AT THE VERY TOP OF THE HIGHEST MOUNTAIN.

ITS MINARETS SPARKLED IN THE MORNING SUN....

RAYS PLAYED THROUGH SLITS IN THE CASTLE TURRETS...

LIKE A LIGHTHOUSE FLICKERING ON THE EDGE OF THE BLACK FOREST...

... WARNING TRAVELERS THEY HAD LOST THEIR WAY.

OUR VILLAGE WAS ALWAYS BUSY.
I COULDN'T REMEMBER IT ANY OTHER WAY.
PEOPLE HARVESTING...
... AND STORING....

... MENDING AND REPAIRING....
... MAKING THE MOST OF THE DAYS.

IF EVERYONE DIDN'T WORK TOGETHER WE COULD STARVE THROUGH THE WINTER MONTHS.
EVE!
EVE!
COME SET THE TABLE! IT'S TIME TO EAT!

SEE YOU TOMORROW, TOM!

WE STAYED IN MY GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE, ALL SEVEN OF US...

... MY BROTHERS, SISTER, MUM AND DAD... GRAN...
... AND ME.
TOM'S FATHER LOST A GOAT THIS MORNING.
OH? WHAT HAPPENED?

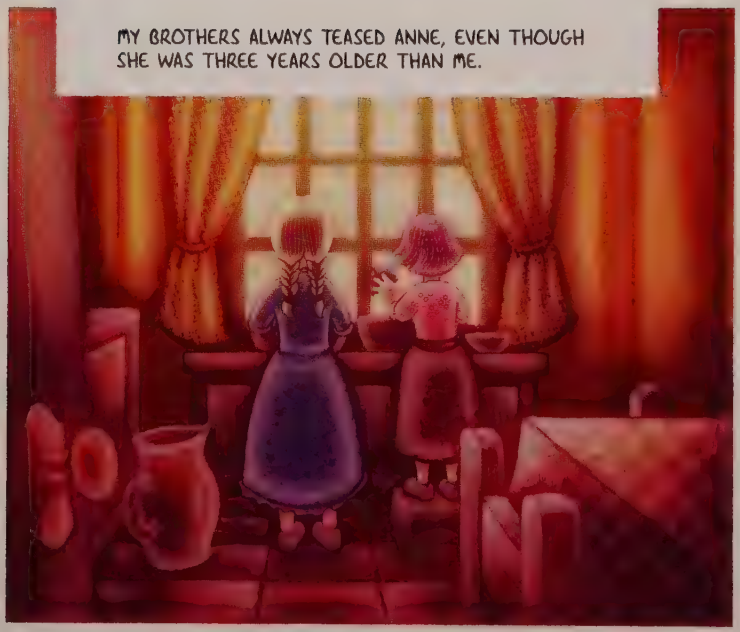
IT WENT TOO FAR
INTO THE FOREST...

DISAPPEARED.

TOM SAID THEY COULD HEAR
ITS LITTLE BELL RINGING
AT FIRST, BUT AFTER
A WHILE...

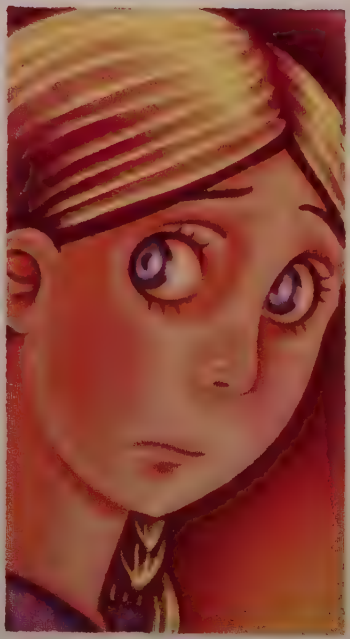
I'VE HEARD PEOPLE HAVE DISAPPEARED THERE.
YOU SHOULD BE CAREFUL. EVEN DRAGOONS CAN GET LOST IN THAT FOREST.
MAYBE THE FOREST MONSTERS GRABBED IT!

JACOB! YVAN! DON'T FRIGHTEN YOUR SISTER!
SIT DOWN AND EAT YOUR SOUP WHILE IT'S HOT!
WE'RE LUCKY TO HAVE ANY, AND YOUR MOTHER HAS TAKEN THE TIME TO MAKE IT.


MY BROTHERS ALWAYS TEASED ANNE, EVEN THOUGH SHE WAS THREE YEARS OLDER THAN ME.

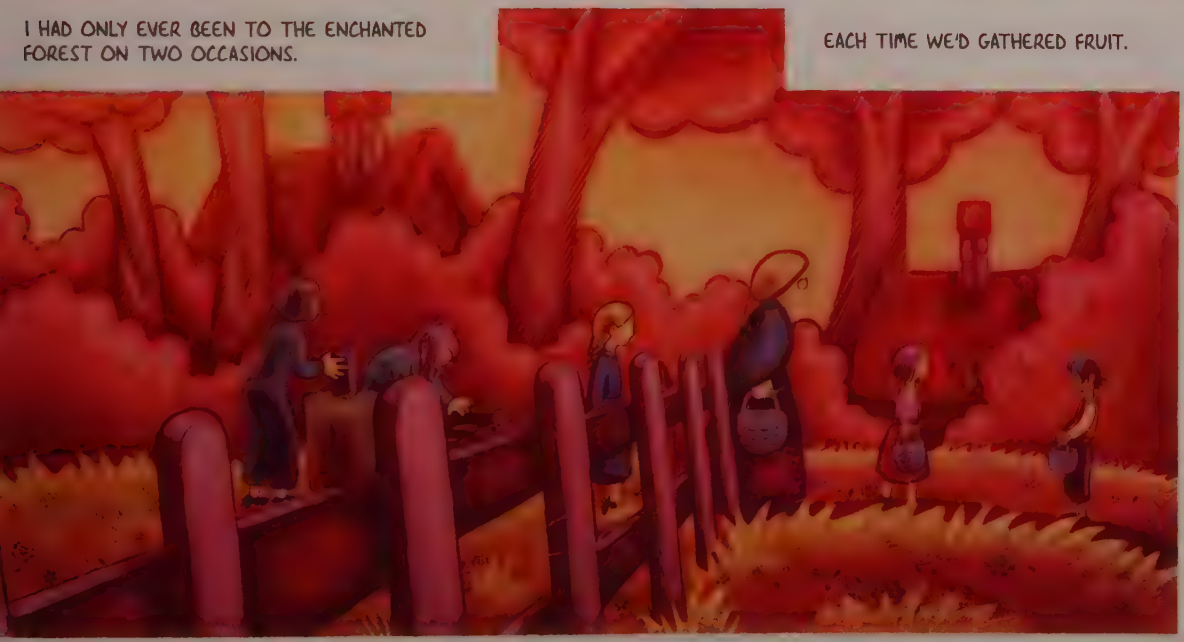
GRAN OFTEN SAID...
ANNE'S GOT A NERVOUS DISPOSITION.

TOM THINKS HE HEARD WOLVES...



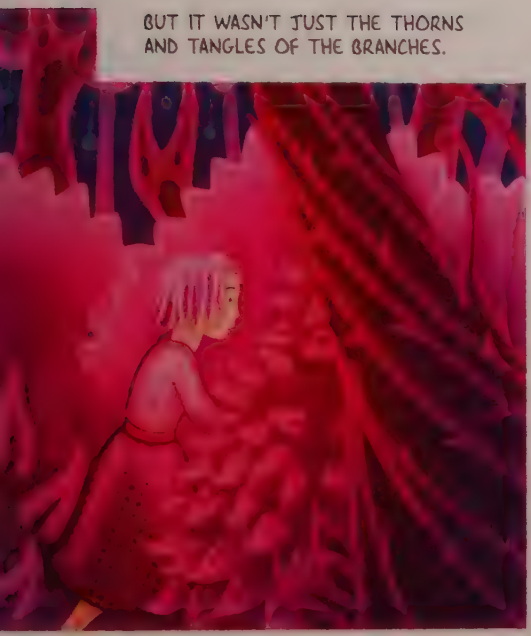
I HAD ONLY EVER BEEN TO THE ENCHANTED FOREST ON TWO OCCASIONS.

EACH TIME WE'D GATHERED FRUIT.

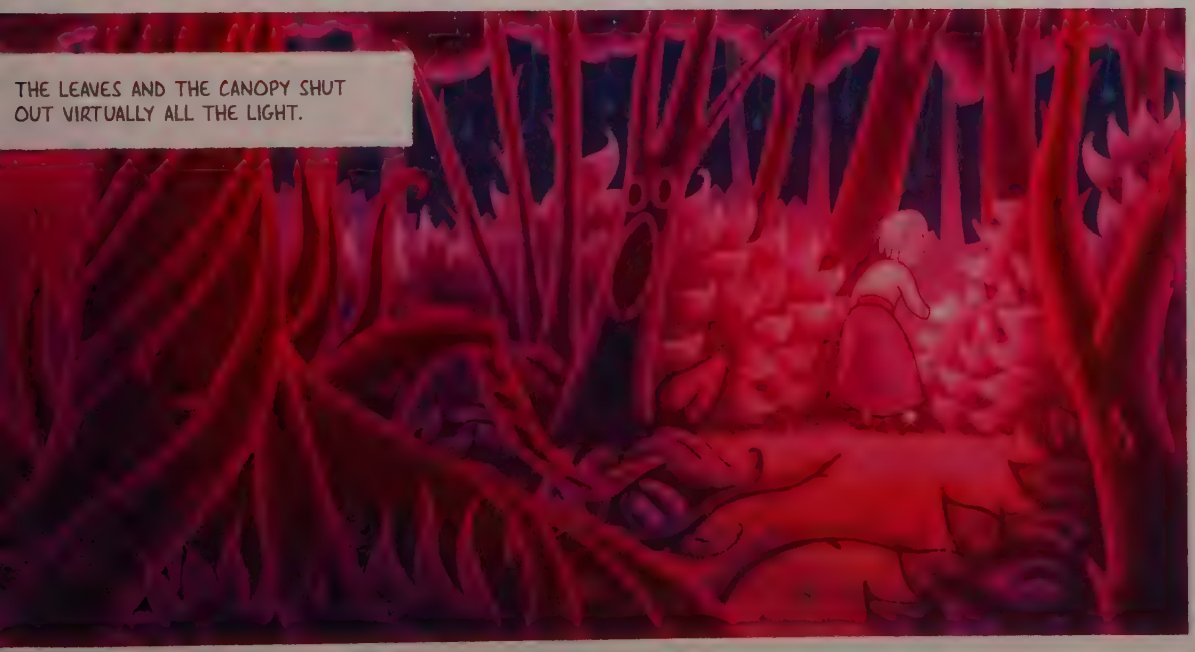


PEOPLE CAME TO PICK THE BRAMBLES, RASPBERRIES AND BLACKBERRIES FROM THE VINES ALONG THE PERIMETER.
NOBODY VENTURED FARTHER.

NEVER HAD THERE BEEN A FOREST SO DENSE, SO TREACHEROUS.


BUT IT WASN'T JUST THE THORNS AND TANGLES OF THE BRANCHES.

THERE WAS SOMETHING FRIGHTENING ABOUT THE FOREST ITSELF... UNWELCOMING.


THE LEAVES AND THE CANOPY SHUT OUT VIRTUALLY ALL THE LIGHT.

THE TREES OFTEN TRAPPED THE UNWARY IN THEIR DREADFUL WOODEN WEBS.

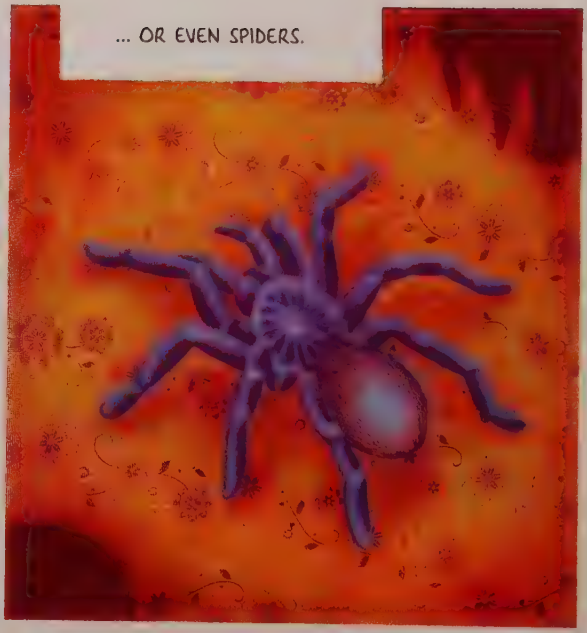
THE VEGETATION OF THE UPPER SLOPES WAS SAID TO BE POISONOUS EVEN TO TOUCH.

BEYOND THE FOREST STOOD BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE ... DARK AND MENACING.

EVERYONE SAID THE MOUNTAIN BROUGHT ITS OWN WEATHER.
NOTHING LIKE THE SURROUNDING COUNTRYSIDE.
EVEN AT THE HEIGHT OF SUMMER ITS PEAKS WERE TOUCHED BY SNOW.

TOM AND I GREW UP IN ITS SHADOW.

SOMETIMES, WE WOULD EXAMINE INSECTS...


... OR EVEN SPIDERS.

MOSTLY, WE JUST PLAYED TOGETHER...

... CREATED OUR OWN LITTLE WORLD.

I CAN'T EVEN REMEMBER NOT KNOWING HIM.

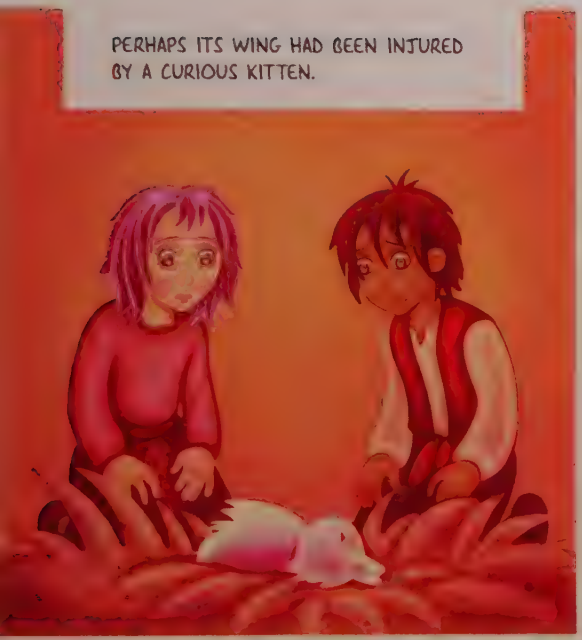
HE WAS MY BEST FRIEND.

CHILDHOOD SUMMERS SEEMED TO STRETCH ENDLESSLY.

TOGETHER, WE SHARED OUR HOPES AND DREAMS FOR FUTURE DAYS.

LATE ONE SPRING WE FOUND...

A
FLEDGLING.


PERHAPS ITS WING HAD BEEN INJURED BY A CURIOUS KITTEN.

IT'S BLEEDING!

LOOK! HER CHEST HAS BEEN CUT!

HER WING'S BEEN DAMAGED BUT HER CHEST ISN'T BLEEDING
...
IT'S JUST HER MARKINGS!

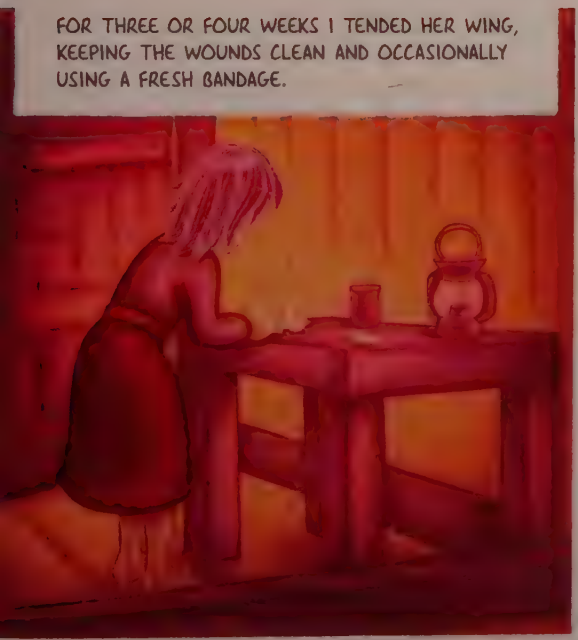
I TOOK
HER HOME
...

...
BANDAGED THE
BROKEN WING
...

...
THEN
GAVE HER
WATER
...

...
AND
SOME
SEEDS
...

SLOWLY, I NURSED THE LITTLE BIRD BACK TO HEALTH.


FOR THREE OR FOUR WEEKS I TENDED HER WING, KEEPING THE WOUNDS CLEAN AND OCCASIONALLY USING A FRESH BANDAGE.

IT TOOK QUITE A WHILE TO HEAL, AND SHE DIDN'T SEEM AT ALL INCLINED TO FLY.

THAT SUMMER WAS THE HOTTEST EVER...

... AND THE VILLAGE WAS WRAPPED IN A SLEEPY HAZE.

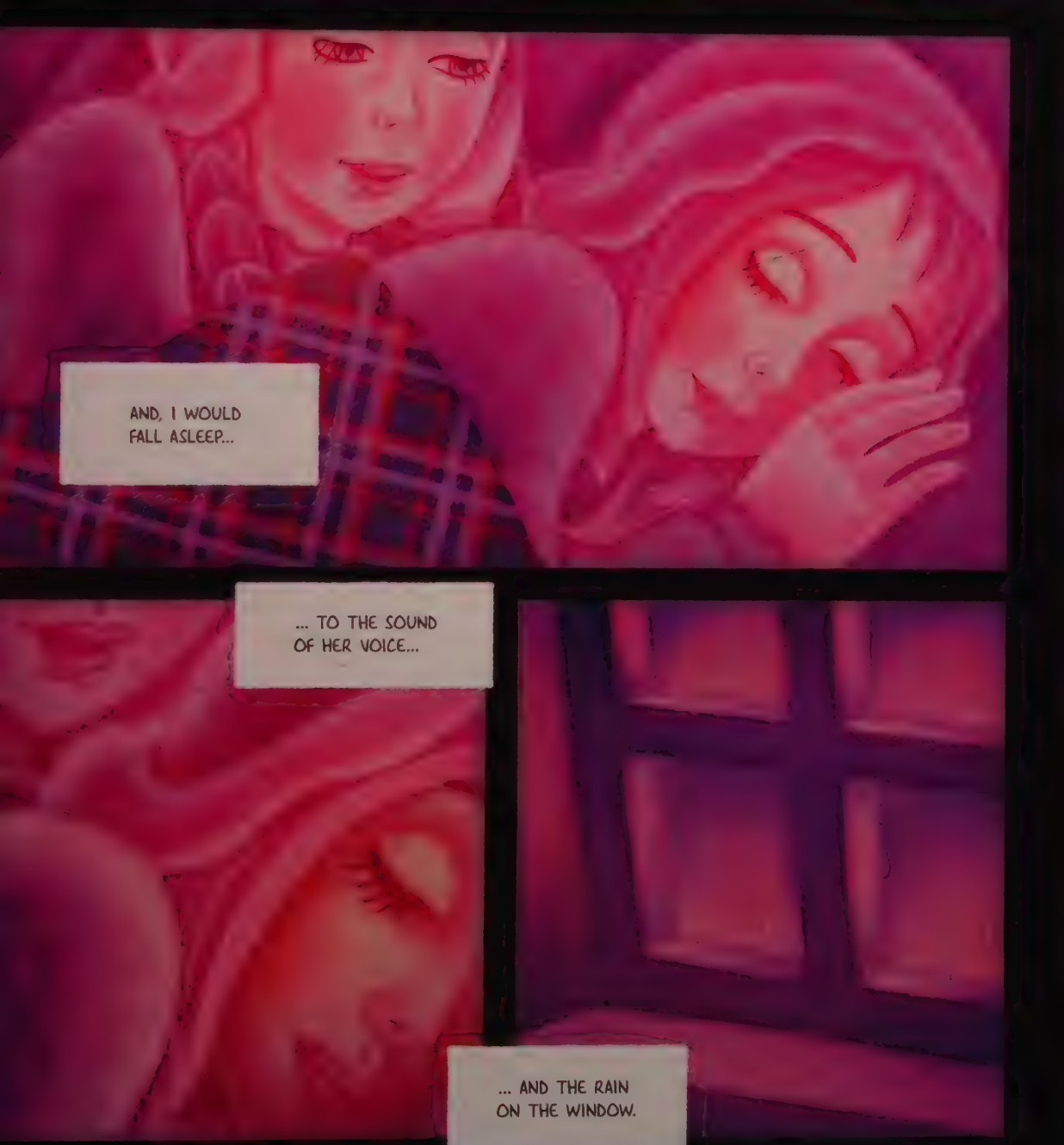
TOM AND I HELPED BOTTLE CHERRIES FOR THE WINTER.

GRAN OFTEN SAID...
VARIETY IS THE SECRET TO A HAPPY LIFE.

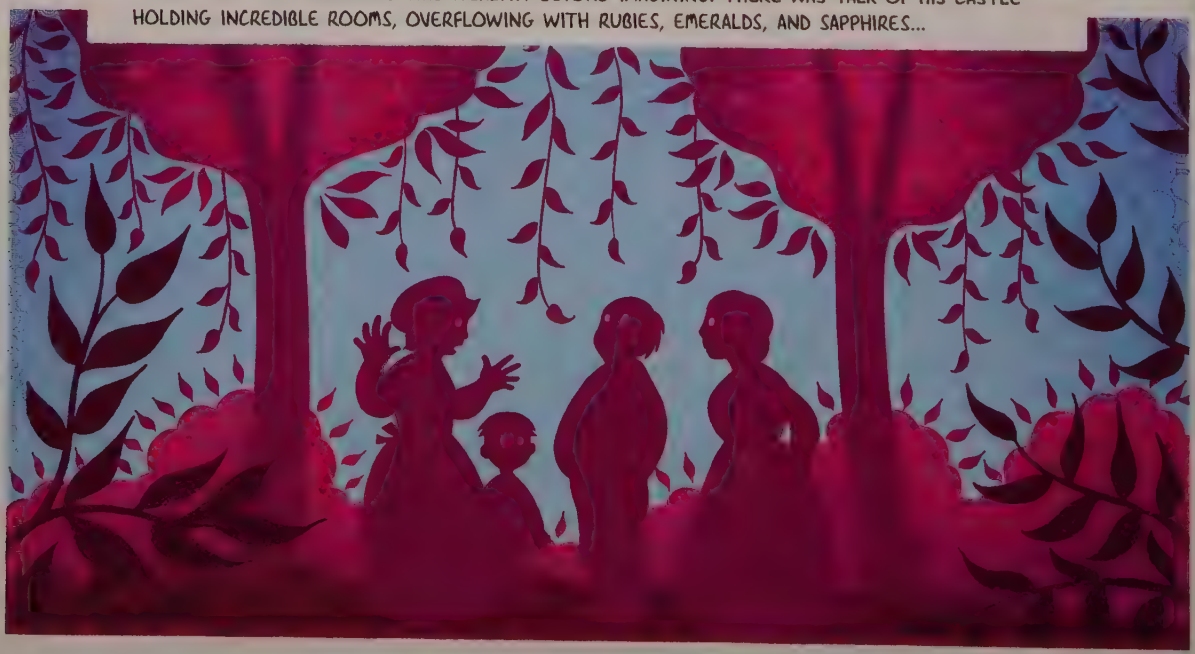
OUR GRANDMOTHER ALWAYS TOLD US A BEDTIME STORY.
THERE ONCE WAS A MAN WHO HAD A GREAT CASTLE, FINE HOUSES, IN BOTH TOWN AND COUNTRY
...
HE HAD MORE GOLD AND SILVER THAN ANYONE COULD DREAM OF, FINE EMBROIDERED FURNITURE, GILDED COACHES, THE FINEST FABRICS
...

BUT THIS MAN HAD THE MISFORTUNE TO HAVE A BLUE BEARD, WHICH MADE HIM SO FRIGHTFULLY UGLY ... THAT ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS RAN AWAY FROM HIM.
NOW, ONE OF HIS NEIGHBORS, A LADY OF QUALITY, HAD TWO DAUGHTERS, WHO WERE PERFECT BEAUTIES.
BLUEBEARD DESIRED TO TAKE THE HAND OF ONE OF THEM IN MARRIAGE ...

AFTER GRAN DIED...
ANNE TOLD THE BEDTIME STORIES.
ONCE UPON A TIME ...
... THERE LIVED IN A VILLAGE, A LITTLE COUNTRY GIRL, THE PRETTIEST CREATURE YOU HAD EVER SEEN ...


AND, I WOULD FALL ASLEEP...
... TO THE SOUND OF HER VOICE...
... AND THE RAIN ON THE WINDOW.

GROWING UP IN THE VILLAGE, ALL THE CHILDREN WERE FRIGHTENED OF BLUEBEARD...
EVEN THOUGH NO ONE HAD ACTUALLY EVER SEEN HIM.


IT WAS SAID THAT BLUEBEARD WAS WEALTHY BEYOND IMAGINING. THERE WAS TALK OF HIS CASTLE
HOLDING INCREDIBLE ROOMS, OVERFLOWING WITH RUBIES, EMERALDS, AND SAPPHIRES...

... THE MOST MARVELOUS GEMS, THE FINEST FABRICS, PRECIOUS GOLD AND SILVER COINS...

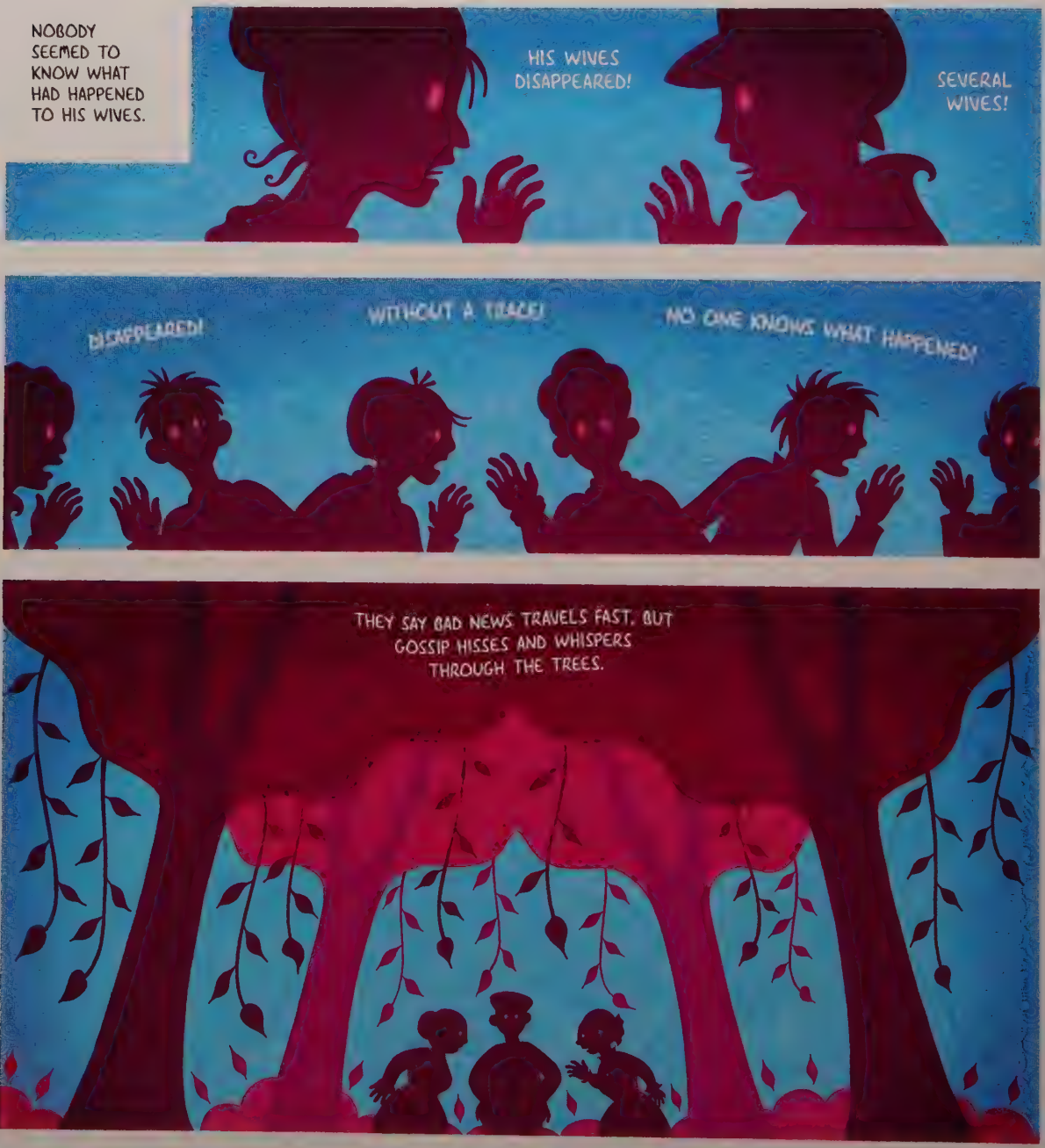
BLUEBEARD OWNS MOST OF THE SURROUNDING LAND.

FROM THE BLACK FOREST TO THE SALMON FALLS.

FOR DINNER, HE HAS A WHOLE WILD BOAR.

AND APPLE SAUCE.

PEOPLE SAID THAT HE HAD BEEN MARRIED BEFORE. SEVERAL TIMES.


NOBODY SEEMED TO KNOW WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO HIS WIVES.
HIS WIVES DISAPPEARED!
SEVERAL WIVES!
DISAPPEARED!
WITHOUT A TRACE!
NO ONE KNOWS WHAT HAPPENED!
THEY SAY BAD NEWS TRAVELS FAST, BUT GOSSIP HISSES AND WHISPERS THROUGH THE TREES.

I SHARED A ROOM WITH MY SISTER ANNE UNTIL OUR BROTHERS LEFT.
JACOB WAS GOING TO BE A DRAGOON, AND YVAN, A MUSKETEER.

THEY WERE BOTH EXCITED...
AND EVEN A LITTLE NERVOUS.

SO, NO GOAT BOY TODAY?
YEAH, WHERE'S TOM?

HIS FATHER HAS TAKEN HIM TO THE MOUNTAINS.

BE CAREFUL
MY SONS!

TOM WAS WORKING MORE AND MORE WITH HIS FATHER, BUT WE STILL OFTEN PLAYED ON THE RIVER BANK. I REMEMBER THE DAY WHEN BRODNY, THE BLACKSMITH'S SON, HAD BEEN PESTERING US ALL MORNING...
COME ON TOM! GIRLS CAN'T CLIMB!
GIRLS CAN'T CLIMB TREES!
I WAGER EVE COULD CLIMB HIGHER THAN YOU.
ANYWAY, SHE'S MY FRIEND, WE'RE TOGETHER.

I THINK SHE'S AFRAID.
AFRAID TO CLIMB!
AFRAID TO CLIMB!
NO, EVE!
IT'S TOO DANGEROUS!

COME BACK DOWN, EVE!
WELL, BRODNY, ARE YOU COMING?

SLIP!

FROM OUR VANTAGE POINT, IT FELT LIKE WE COULD SEE FOREVER.

WE'LL GO AND EXPLORE THE WORLD TOGETHER.

EVERY MORNING, MY FRIEND CAME TO SEE ME, TO DRINK A LITTLE WATER AND TO SING.

TOM HAD SAID SOME INSECTS SPEND THEIR WHOLE LIVES NOT REALIZING THEY HAVE WINGS.

..

NOT REALIZING THEY CAN FLY.

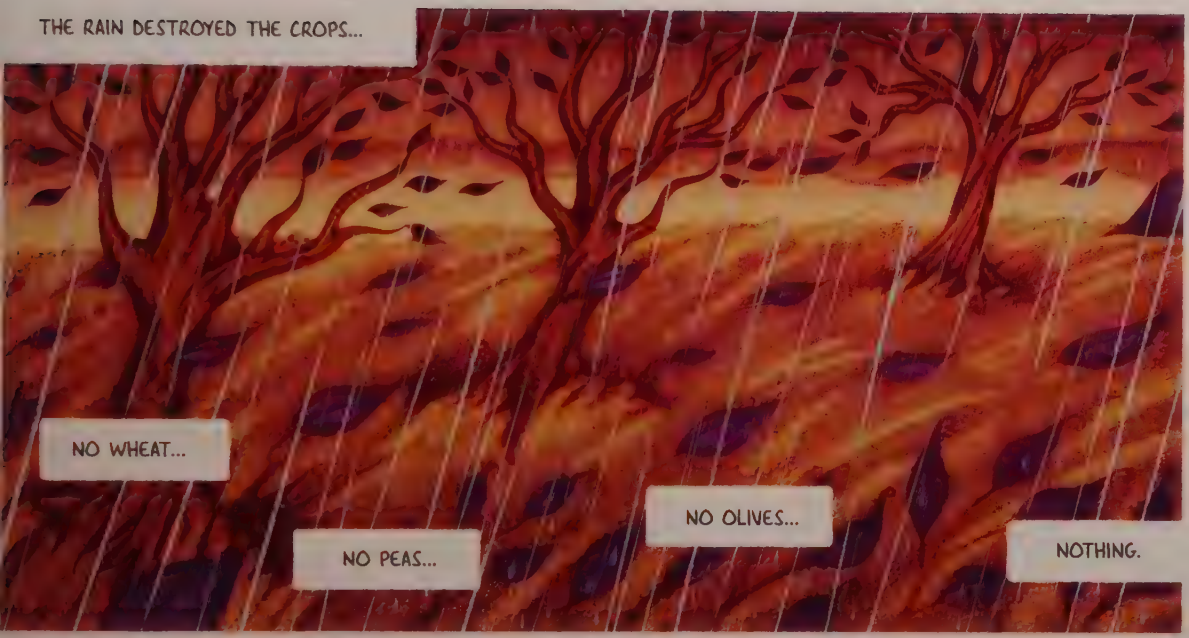
THE SUMMER I TURNED EIGHTEEN SAW RAIN.

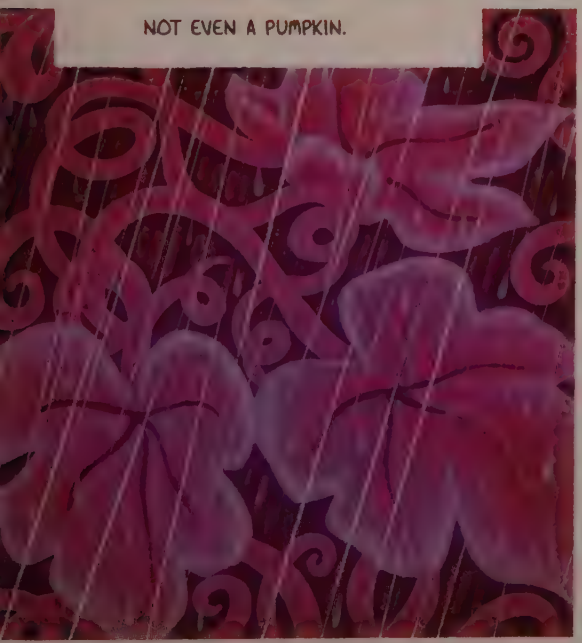
EVERY DAY FROM MORNING TILL NIGHT...

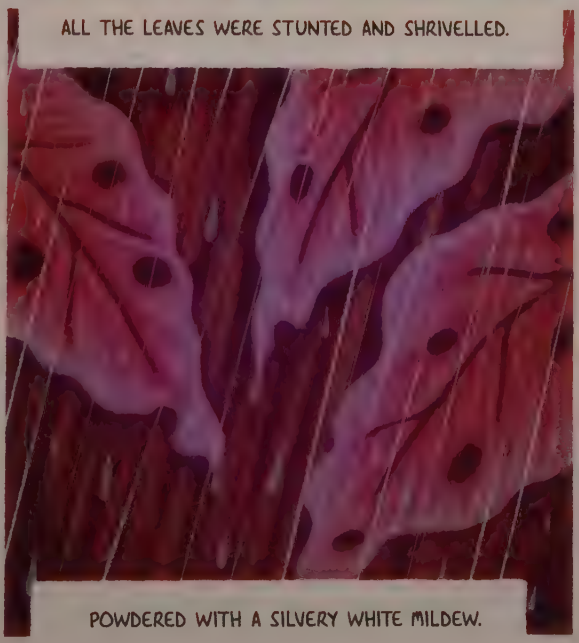
... ALMOST CONTINUOUSLY.

SOMETIMES SO HEAVY NOT A SOUL
DARED VENTURE OUT.

EVEN THE GOATS HAD SEEN
ENOUGH OF THE RAIN.


THE RAIN DESTROYED THE CROPS...
NO WHEAT...
NO PEAS...
NO OLIVES...
NOTHING.

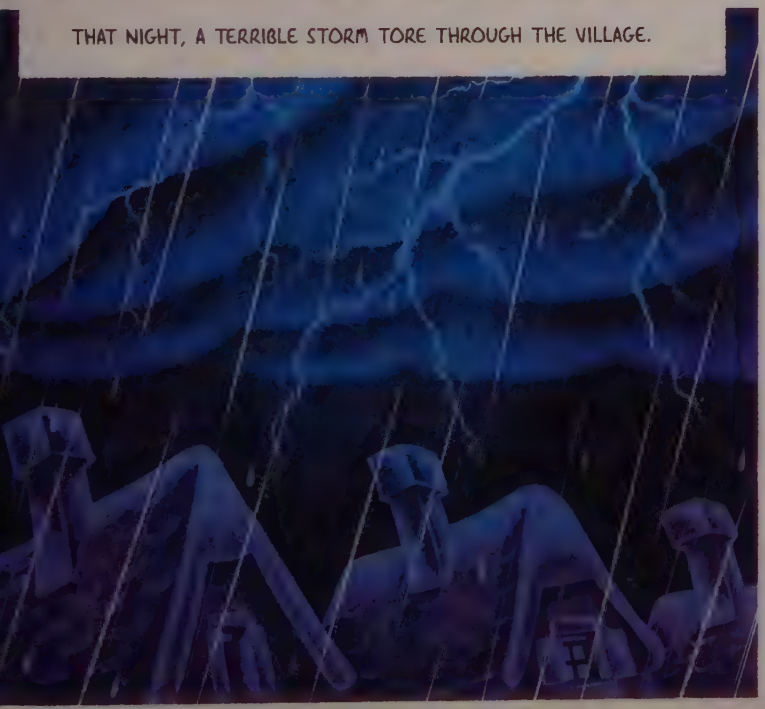

NOT EVEN A PUMPKIN.


ALL THE LEAVES WERE STUNTED AND SHRIVELLED.
POWDERED WITH A SILVERY WHITE MILDEW.

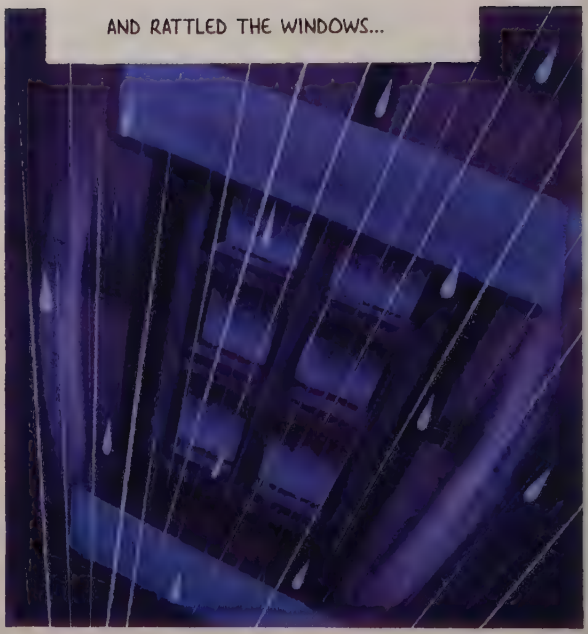
ONE EVENING...
... A STRANGE LIGHT DESCENDED UPON THE VILLAGE.
TOM BROUGHT HIS GOATS DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN.

HE WHISPERED TO ME THEY WOULD NOT SURVIVE THE NIGHT OUTSIDE.

EVEN HERDED TOGETHER THE ANIMALS WERE RESTLESS.


THAT NIGHT, A TERRIBLE STORM TORE THROUGH THE VILLAGE.

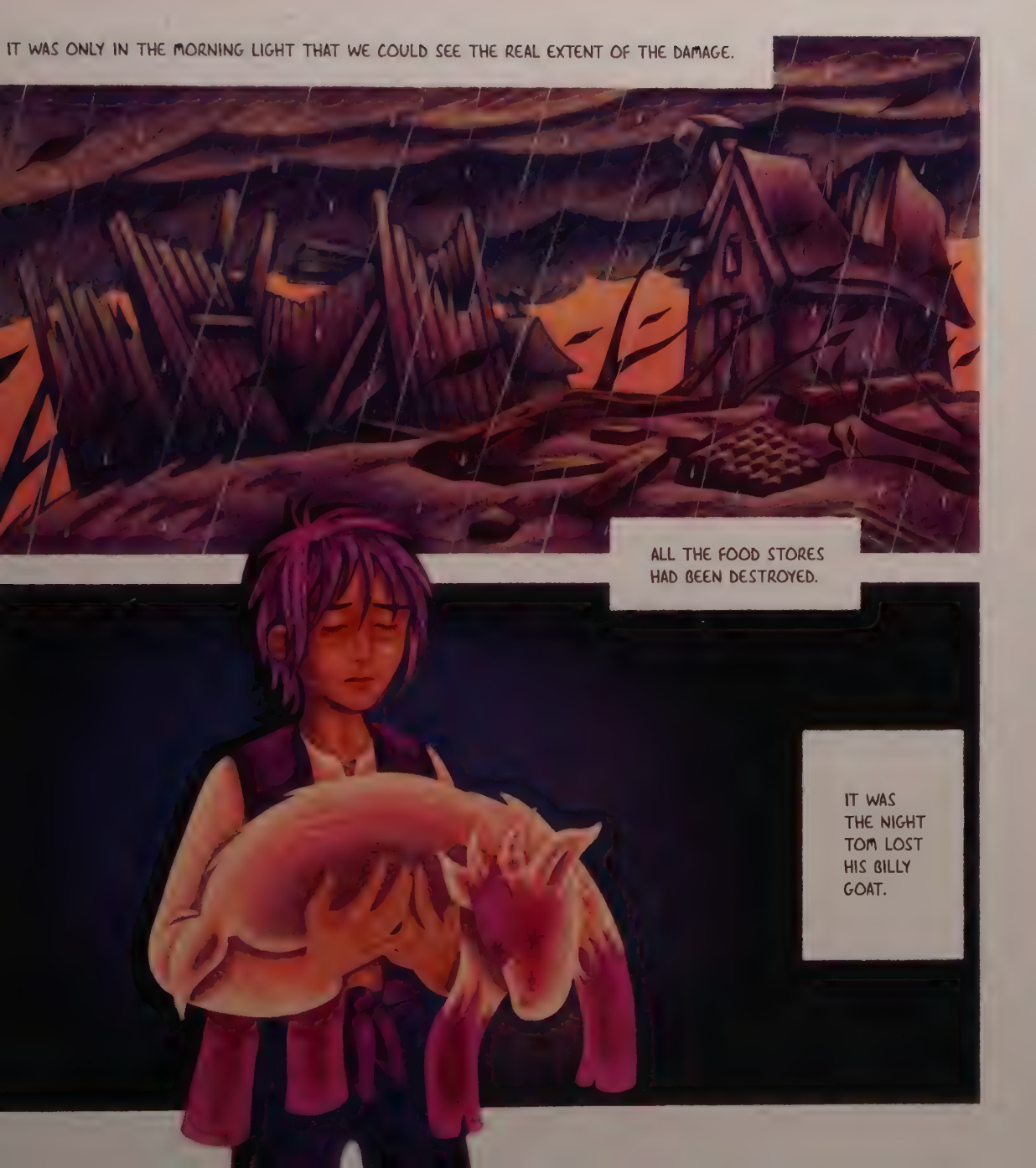
THE WIND HOWLED THROUGH THE CHIMNEYS...


AND RATTLED THE WINDOWS...

RUMBLE
THE SOUND OF THUNDER DISTURBED OUR SLEEP...

A SUDDEN FLASH OF LIGHTNING SET FIRE TO THE BARN.
THE SOUND WAS AWFUL. THE POOR CREATURES WERE TERRIFIED.

EVEN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT
WE HAD THE FIRE UNDER CONTROL
QUICKLY...


IT WAS ONLY IN THE MORNING LIGHT THAT WE COULD SEE THE REAL EXTENT OF THE DAMAGE.
ALL THE FOOD STORES HAD BEEN DESTROYED.
IT WAS THE NIGHT TOM LOST HIS BILLY GOAT.

ALREADY MONTHS OF RAIN HAD MADE EVERYTHING DAMP.
BERRIES WERE INFECTED WITH MOLD AND DISEASE...

THE FRUIT TREES WERE BARREN...
AND NOTHING GREW.

ALL THAT WAS LEFT WAS HUNGER.

I REMEMBER SEEING MY BROTHERS IN THEIR UNIFORMS IN THE MOONLIGHT.

THE ARMY ALLOWED THEM LEAVE EVERY MONTH ...

AND THEY HAD FILLED THEIR KNAPSACKS ON THEIR TRAVELS.

BUT EVEN THE FOOD THEY BROUGHT WASN'T QUITE ENOUGH TO GO ROUND.

THE WEEKS THAT FOLLOWED WERE MARKED BY SICKNESS.
FOR MY PART, I LOST THE MEASURE OF TIME.
DAYS WERE NIGHTS.
AS MY FEVER REACHED ITS PEAK, I HALLUCINATED WILDLY...
DON'T WORRY, EVE, TOM'S BEEN FEEDING ME EVERY MORNING BEFORE HE GOES TO WORK WITH HIS FATHER.
VISIONS AS IF FROM A DREAM.

THROUGHOUT THE WEEKS OF MY ILLNESS, NOTHING COULD STOP TOM COMING TO SEE ME EVERY DAY. ..
EVEN THOUGH I WAS HIGHLY CONTAGIOUS.
HE BROUGHT ME WATER, AND A LITTLE FETA FROM HIS FATHER'S GOATS...
BUT I COULDN'T EAT.
WHEN THE FEVER FINALLY BROKE...
... THE RAIN HAD STOPPED, AND THE DAY SEEMED STRANGELY QUIET.

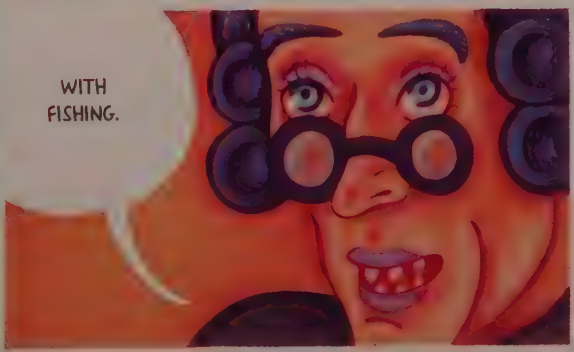
SPRING CAME...

AND WITH IT, AN
UNEXPECTED VISITOR...

COUNT BLUEBEARD, HEREBY CORDIALLY INVITES YOU, YOUR FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND NEIGHBORS, FOR A WEEK AND A DAY...

... TO ENJOY THE PLEASURE OF THE RESPECTABLE GENTLEMAN'S HOSPITALITY AT HIS VERY OWN LUXURIOUS COUNTRY HOUSE.

SCRETCH!


WITH FISHING.

BLUEBEARD?
WHAT WAS THAT, DEAR?
WHAT? AN INVITATION? WHY WOULD HE WANT TO INVITE US?
AND OUR NEIGHBORS?
NO ONE IS GOING TO WANT TO GO NEAR HIS COUNTRY HOUSE! EVERYONE'S FRIGHTENED ... THERE'S NO WAY!

BUT, AFTER MONTHS OF HARDSHIP...
... IT WAS UNDERSTANDABLE THAT EVERYONE ENJOYED EIGHT DAYS OF LUXURY...

EIGHT NIGHTS OF AMUSEMENT.

THE COUNTRY HOUSE DID NOT SEE ANY SLEEP.
OH, MY GROANING GUTS!
MY ACHING STOMACH!
I THINK I'VE EATEN TOO MUCH AT ONCE!
BRODNY'S EATEN FIFTEEN BLINIS!

ON THE EIGHTH DAY, OUT OF THE SHADOWS...

...
AND ALMOST UNNOTICED AT FIRST...

OUR HOST APPEARED.

TALK SOON TURNED TO THE RESPECTABLE GENTLEMAN, AND HOW HE WAS PROBABLY NOT QUITE AS BAD AS SOME OF THE WORST STORIES HAD SUGGESTED.

IN FACT, THE WOMEN WHO HAD ONCE PRONOUNCED BLUEBEARD SO HIDEOUSLY UGLY HAD COME ROUND TO QUITE A DIFFERENT WAY OF THINKING.

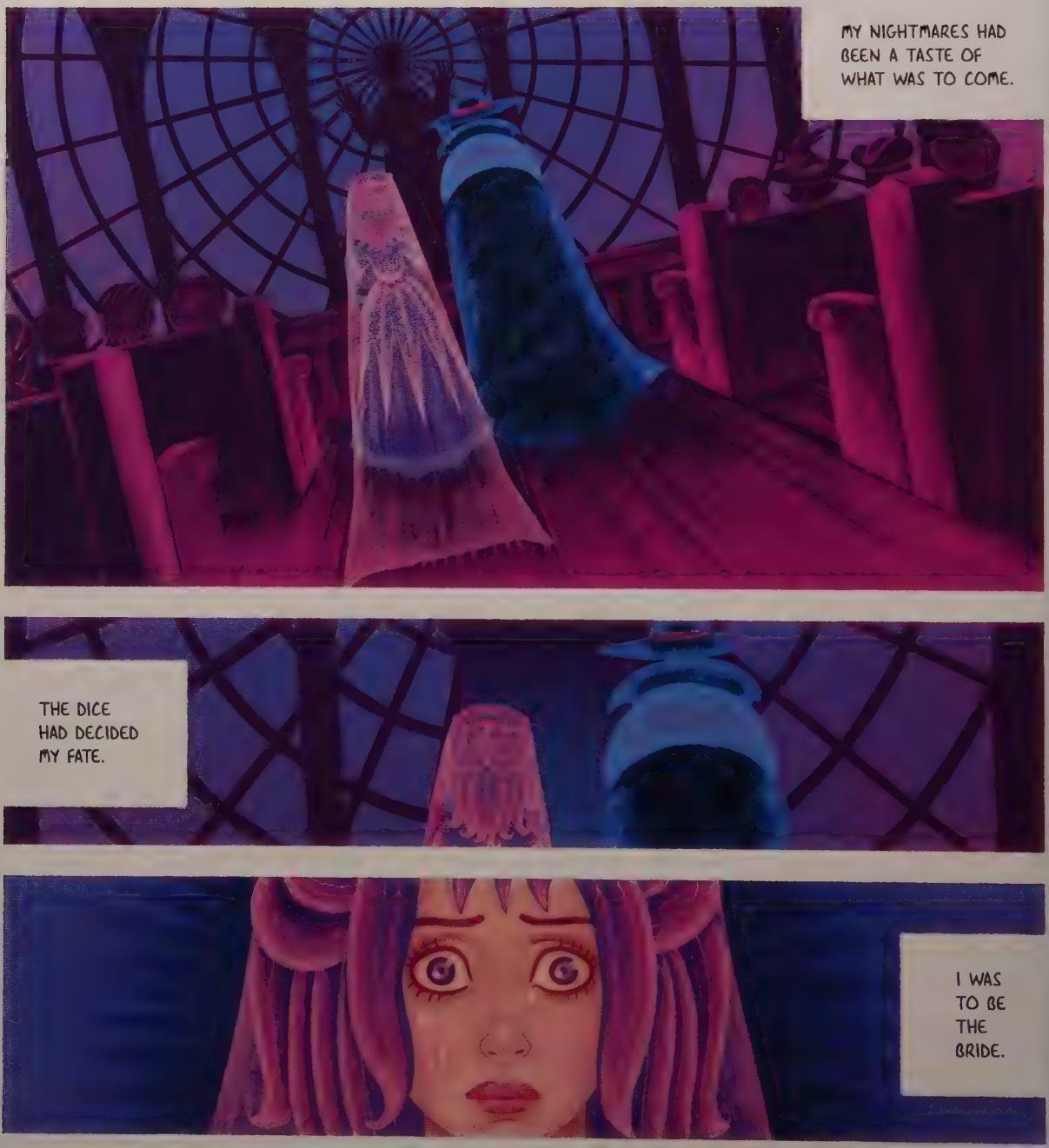
WHAT THEY WERE DISCUSSING, I COULD NEVER HAVE GUESSED...

BUT IT LEFT ME WITH A FEELING OF UNEASE.

BACK IN MY OWN BED, I COULDN'T SLEEP. MY DREAMS WERE RESTLESS... NIGHTMARES.
I THOUGHT I COULD HEAR VOICES FROM DOWNSTAIRS...
AND I COULDN'T HELP OVERHEARING MY PARENTS...

COUNT BLUEBEARD DESIRES OUR DAUGHTER'S HAND IN MARRIAGE.
GOODNESS! HE DOESN'T EVEN SAY WHICH ONE!
WELL... SOME THINGS LOOK WORSE THAN THEY ARE.
EVERYONE IS ON EDGE AND...
THINGS HAVE BEEN SO DIFFICULT SINCE ALL THE CROPS FAILED.
I KNOW, BUT IT DOESN'T SEEM FAIR...

THAT WAY, WE MIGHT BE ABLE TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE.
YES, BUT OUR OWN DAUGHTER!
AND WHICH ONE!?
AND THEY LEFT THE DECISION TO THE DICE...


MY NIGHTMARES HAD BEEN A TASTE OF WHAT WAS TO COME.
THE DICE HAD DECIDED MY FATE.
I WAS TO BE THE BRIDE.

... AND THE GIFT MY MOTHER HAD INSISTED WE BRING... THE JAR OF CHERRIES...
I KNOW IT ISN'T MUCH, NOT A DOWRY, BUT A GESTURE.
A TOKEN OF OUR APPRECIATION.
... TURNED OUT TO BE MAGGOTY.

HOURS PASSED THAT EVENING...
LOST HOURS, SUSPENDED AND STRANGE...

EVERYONE WAS IN SUCH HIGH SPIRITS, NOBODY NOTICED WHEN I SPOKE TO TOM.
MEET ME BY THE RIVER, I SWEAR I CAN'T GO THROUGH WITH THIS.
NEVER FOR A MINUTE DID I THINK I WOULD BREAK MY APPOINTMENT WITH TOM, WITH MY LOVE.

BUT EVERY TIME I TRIED TO GET AWAY, EACH TIME I TRIED TO LEAVE...
IT WAS AS IF AN INVISIBLE BARRIER BLOCKED MY PATH.
FACES SWAM IN MY VISION. A DANCE OF CONFUSION.

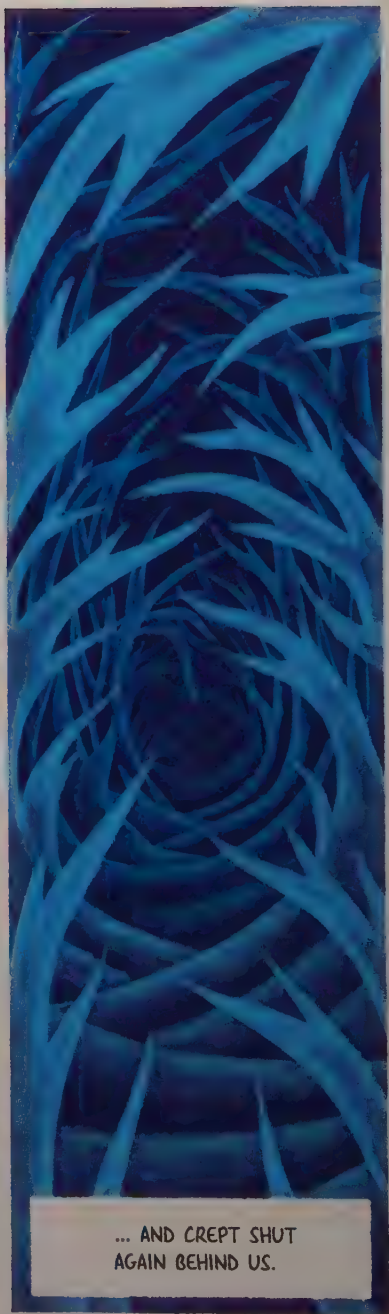
I'D BROKEN MY PROMISE TO POOR TOM.
I COULD PICTURE HIM WAITING PATIENTLY UNDER THE FLOWER MOON.

EVE!

I FOUND MYSELF IN THE MATRIMONIAL CARRIAGE APPROACHING THE ENCHANTED FOREST.

ITS DENSE TANGLE OF THORNS AND BRANCHES SEEMED TO BLOCK OUR PATH...

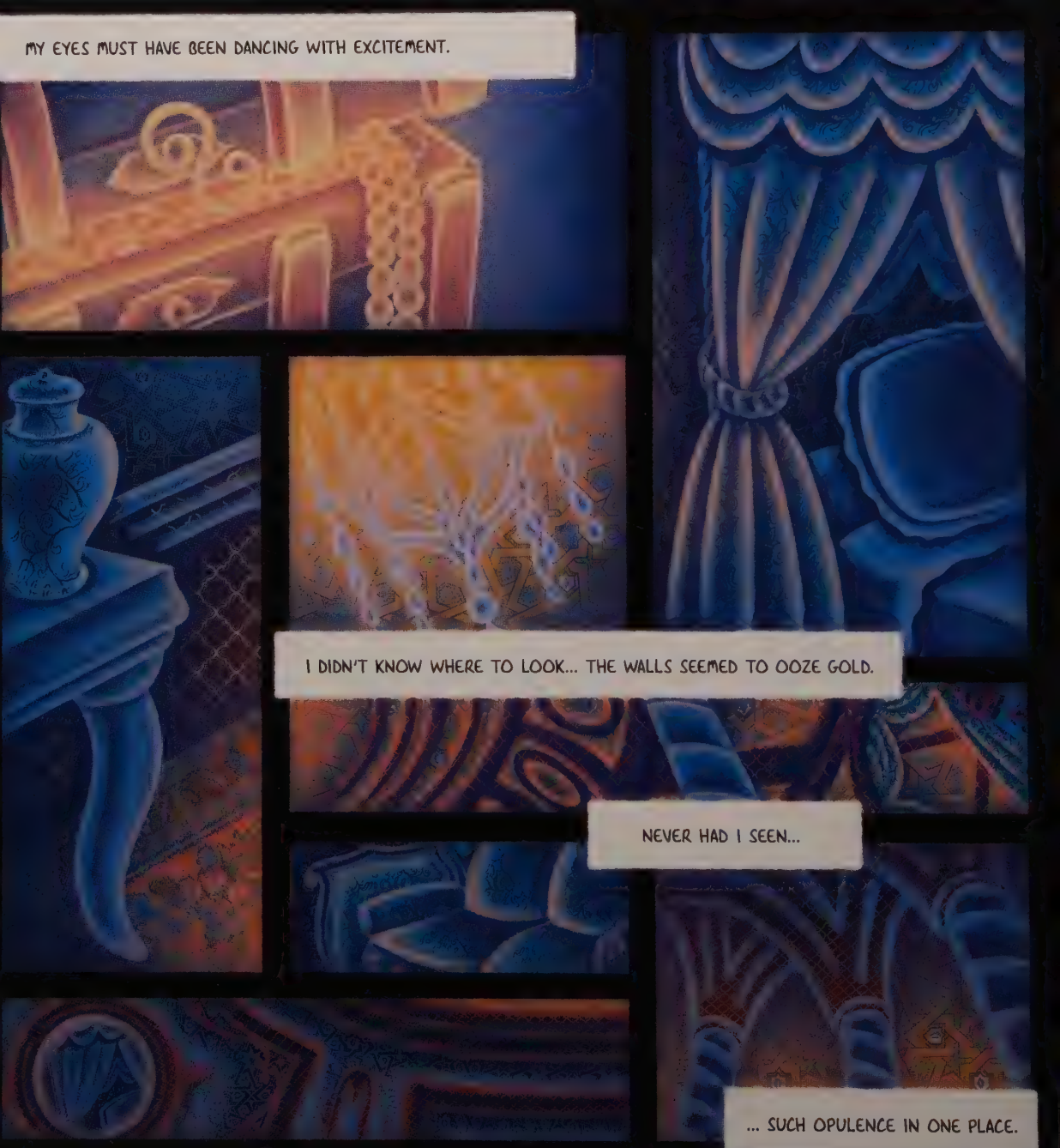
WHEN SUDDENLY, A HOLLOW WAY APPEARED...
... ALLOWING ALMOST MAGICAL ACCESS...


... AND CREPT SHUT AGAIN BEHIND US.

I COULD SENSE BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE LOOMING OVER US.
ABOVE THE CLOUDS, THE PALE MOON GLISTENED.

OUR CARRIAGE DREW TO A STOP.
GROAN CREEEK
SLOWLY, THE CASTLE DOOR OPENED.

INSIDE, THERE WAS AN EMBARRASSMENT OF RICHES.
MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME, MY DEAR.
WHAT IS MINE IS YOURS. MY HOME IS YOUR HOME.
MY RICHES, YOURS.


MY EYES MUST HAVE BEEN DANCING WITH EXCITEMENT.
I DIDN'T KNOW WHERE TO LOOK... THE WALLS SEEMED TO OOZE GOLD.
NEVER HAD I SEEN...
... SUCH OPULENCE IN ONE PLACE.

BEYOND THE RICHES LAY YEARS OF NEGLECT.
ROOMS FULL OF DUST.
INSECTS IN HORDES.
CORRIDORS OF SHADOWS...
ENDLESS ARRAYS OF DOORS.

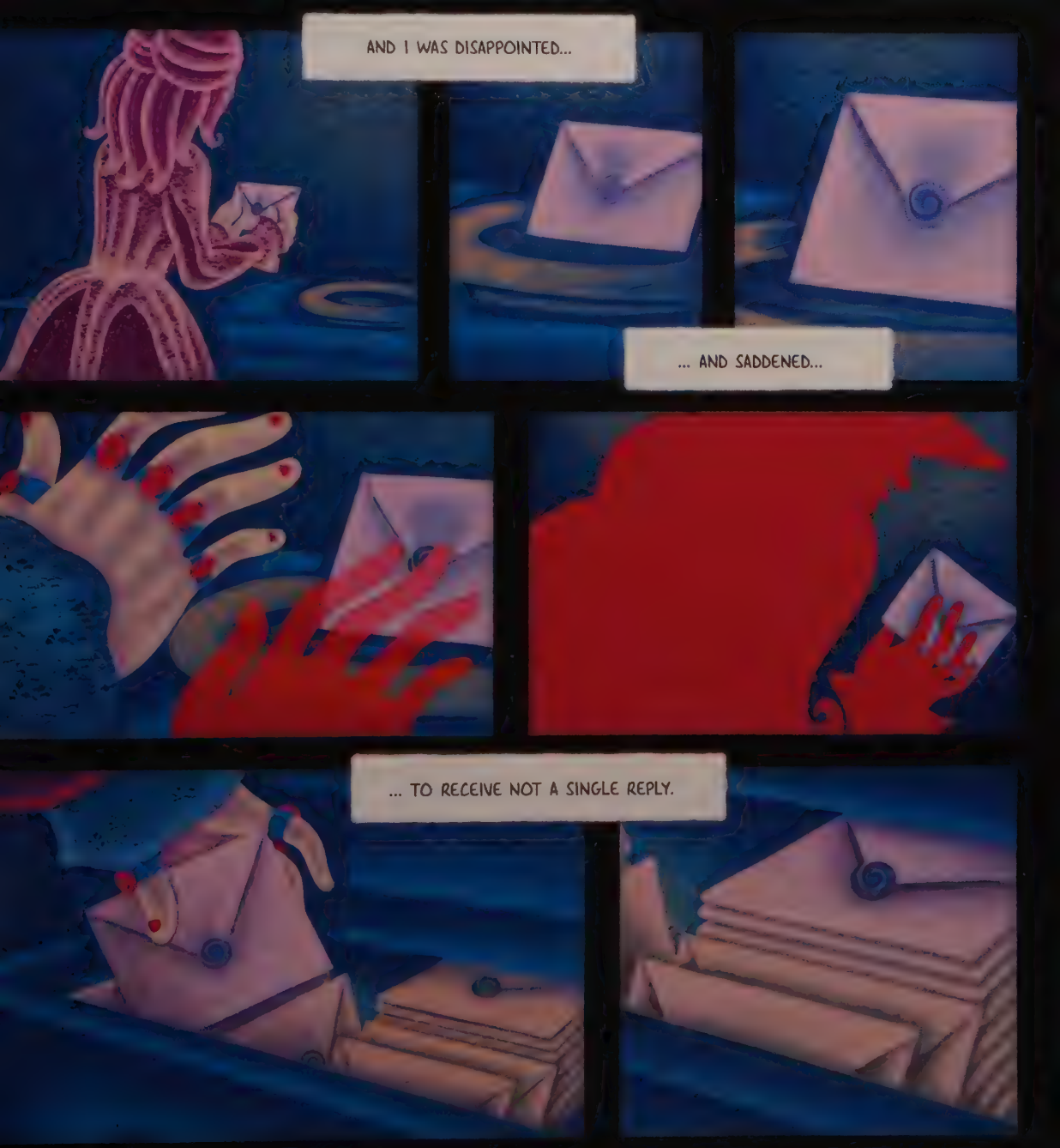
I SOON SETTLED INTO A NEW, UNEVENTFUL LIFE ...

AND MY HUSBAND SEEMED MOST CHARMING... ACCOMMODATING.

STILL, I COULDN'T SHAKE THE FEELING OF UNEASE.

OF COURSE I WROTE TO MY DEAREST TOM EVERY DAY.

My Dearest Tom,


AND I WAS DISAPPOINTED...
... AND SADDENED...
... TO RECEIVE NOT A SINGLE REPLY.

EVE SHOULD HAVE WRITTEN BY NOW...

... EVEN IF SHE COULDN'T MEET ME
...
COULDN'T GET AWAY
...
STILL... A LETTER!

PERHAPS YOU'RE RIGHT, TOM.
SHE'S A MARRIED WOMAN NOW.
BUT SHE WOULDN'T FORGET HER OWN BROTHERS! SHE WOULDN'T TURN HER BACK ON...

JACOB!
YVAN!

AFTER BARELY A MONTH, BLUEBEARD WAS CALLED AWAY ON URGENT BUSINESS.
I MUST LEAVE ON URGENT BUSINESS.
WITH THAT, HE HELD UP A BUNCH OF KEYS.
NATURALLY, YOU MAY GO ANYWHERE, AND OPEN ANY DOOR ...
BUT WHATEVER YOU DO, YOU MUST NOT USE THIS LITTLE GOLDEN KEY.
IT OPENS THE DOOR AT THE END OF THE LONG CORRIDOR OF THE GALLERY.

AS HE HANDED ME THE KEYS, A DARK CLOUD PASSED OVER HIS FEATURES.
... FOR IF YOU DO ... YOU WILL NOT ESCAPE THE FULL FORCE OF MY WRATH.
YOU MAY FILL THE CASTLE WITH YOUR FAMILY, WITH YOUR FRIENDS.
THEY'RE INVITED.
BUT THEY'RE TOO AFRAID OF THE FOREST. THEY COULDN'T COME!
OH, THEY'LL COME. THEY'LL COME.

WITH BLUEBEARD GONE, I WAS ALONE IN THE CASTLE...

LOCKED IN AND ALONE.

SO DESPERATELY I WISHED TO LEAVE TO SEE MY TOM

I TRIED KEY AFTER KEY AFTER KEY IN TURN...

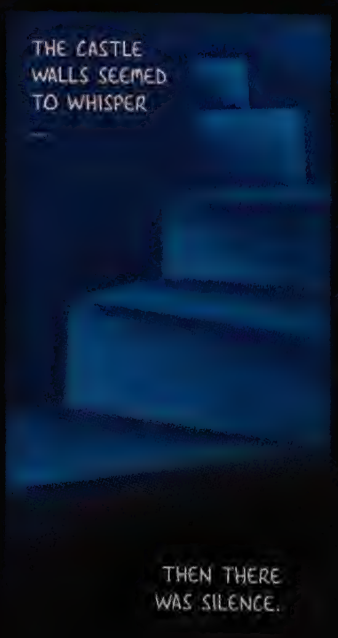
BUT IT WAS HOPELESS: THE DOOR REMAINED SHUT.

I ROAMED THE CASTLE...
OPENING DOOR AFTER DOOR AFTER DOOR...
BUT I COULD NOT FIND A WAY OUT.

RICHES UPON RICHES: A SADNESS SURROUNDING THEM.

WHAT WAS THAT SOUND?

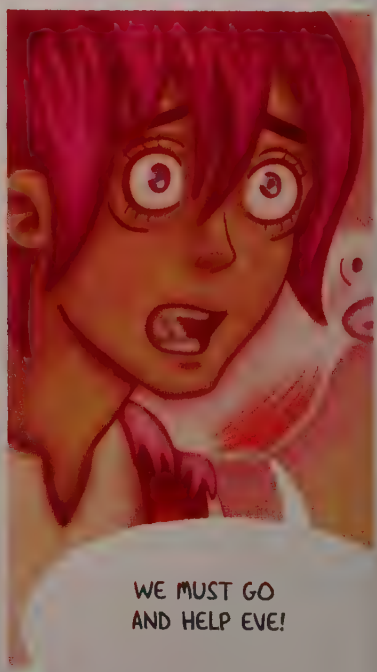
WAS IT JUST THE WIND HOWLING THROUGH THE OLD STONES?


THE CASTLE WALLS SEEMED TO WHISPER
THEN THERE WAS SILENCE.

I'VE SEEN SOME STRANGE THINGS ...
BUT I TELL YOU, SOMETHING'S NOT RIGHT!
THE VILLAGE FEELS DIFFERENT ...
THAT'S TRUE ... SORT OF ... EMPTY.

AND ANNE HASN'T BEEN HOME ... IT'S NOT LIKE HER.

I TELL YOU, SOMETHING'S GOING ON AT THE CASTLE.


WE MUST GO AND HELP EVE!

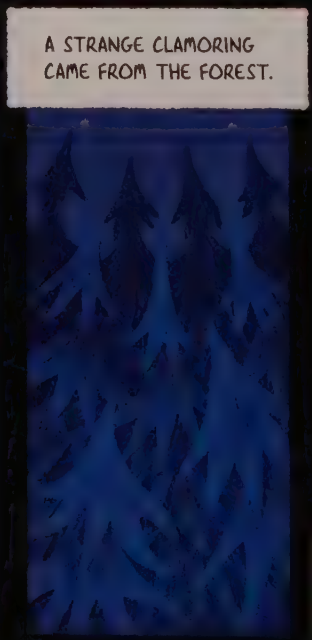
My dearest Eve,
GO ON! TAKE A MESSAGE TO OUR EVE!

AT SUCH HIGH ALTITUDES, THE THIN MOUNTAIN AIR WAS STILL.
SO YOU CAN FLY AFTER ALL!
WHY ARE YOU HERE?
WHAT MESSAGE DO YOU BRING AT THIS LATE HOUR?

MY BLOOD FROZE AS I READ TOM'S LETTER.
NOT ONE OF MY LETTERS HAD REACHED MY FAMILY OR MY LOVE. SOMETHING WAS NOT RIGHT AT THE CASTLE!

SOMETHING WAS GOING ON!

AND I BARELY HAD TIME TO FORMULATE A REPLY...


A STRANGE CLAMORING CAME FROM THE FOREST.

I SENT OUR DOVE BACK TO THE VILLAGE SUMMONING HELP.
HOPING IT WAS NOT TOO LATE!

THE VISITORS WALKED AS IF IN A TRANCE.
EVEN ANNE.
EVEN MY OWN SISTER. AS IF SHE DID NOT KNOW ME.

THEY SEEMED MESMERIZED, PERHAPS BY THE WEALTH OF THE RICHES ALL AROUND THEM.

IT WAS AS IF I WASN'T THERE. NOT A WORD DID THEY UTTER. EVEN THOUGH I HAD BEEN AWAY FOR A MONTH, IT WAS AS IF THEY HAD NOT MISSED ME. NOT ONLY HAD LIFE GONE ON IN MY ABSENCE, IT WAS AS IF I DIDN'T EVEN EXIST.

I LOOKED AT THEM BUT THEY COULD NOT SEE ME.

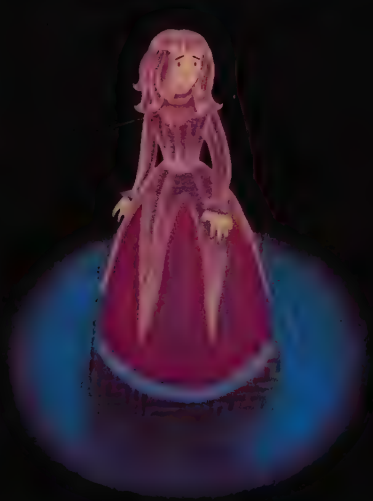
I SPOKE TO THEM BUT THEY COULD NOT HEAR ME.

I PUT MY HANDS ON THEIR SHOULDERS BUT THEY COULD NOT FEEL ME.

THEY WANDERED OFF THROUGH THE LABYRINTHINE CORRIDORS...

AND I LOST SIGHT OF THEM ALTOGETHER.

ONCE AGAIN I WAS ALONE.

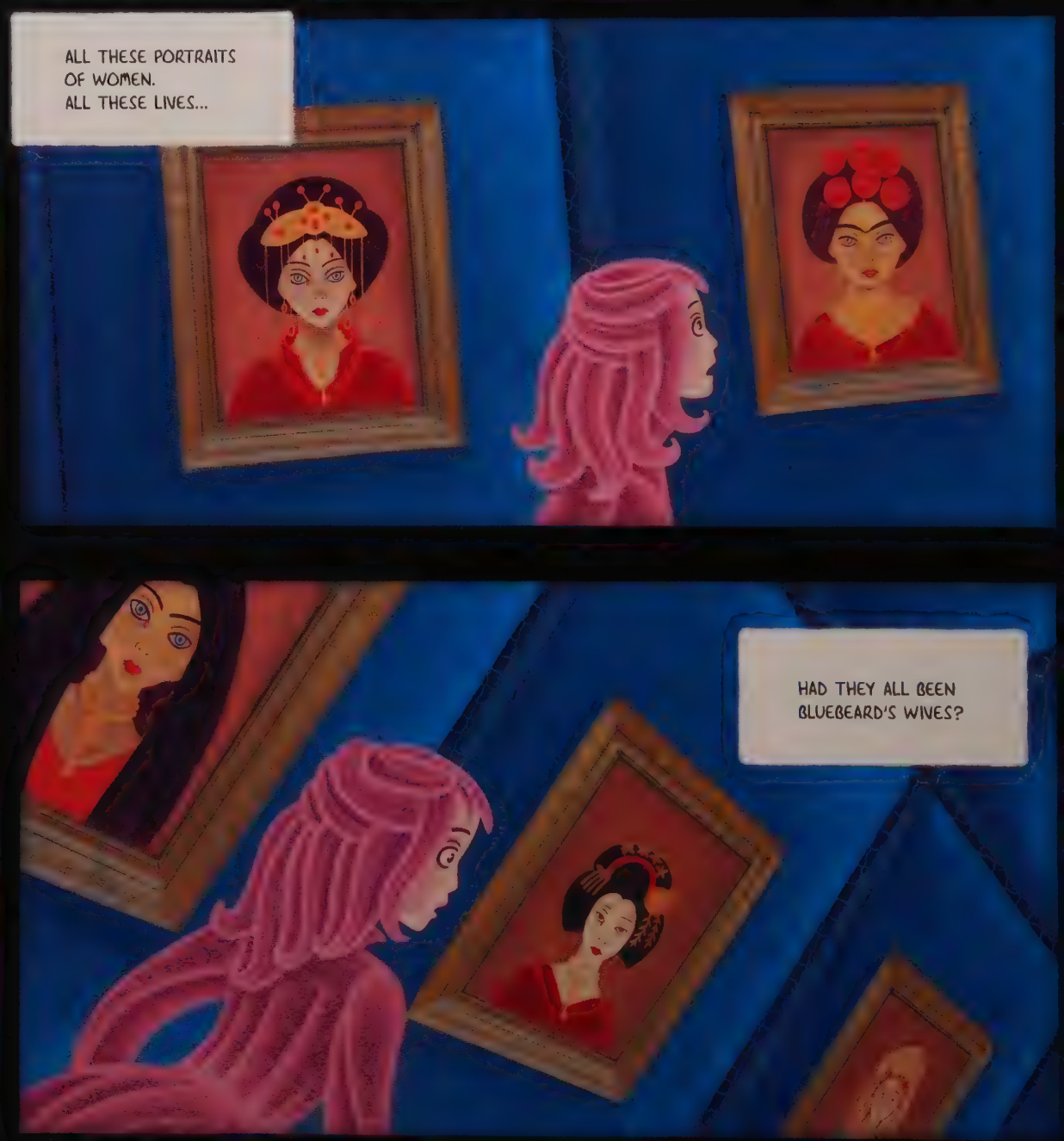


AND ONCE AGAIN, THE CASTLE DOOR REMAINED SHUT.

SOMETHING PREVENTED MY LEAVING.

AT THE HEART OF BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE LAY A MYSTERY...
AND I BEGAN TO FEEL THAT I HELD THE KEY TO IT RIGHT HERE, IN MY VERY HAND.
IF WE WERE TRULY MAN AND WIFE... TRULY HUSBAND AND WIFE... THERE SHOULD BE OPENNESS...
COMPLETE OPENNESS. NO SECRETS. ... NOT THAT I EVER FELT LIKE A WIFE.
WHY GIVE ME THE KEY IF HE DIDN'T THINK I WOULD USE IT?
HOW ANGRY COULD HE REALLY BE?

I FOUND MYSELF ENTERING THE LONG CORRIDOR OF THE GALLERY.


ALL THESE PORTRAITS
OF WOMEN.
ALL THESE LIVES...
HAD THEY ALL BEEN
BLUEBEARD'S WIVES?

WHATEVER
HAPPENED
TO
THEM?

I REMEMBERED BLUEBEARD'S WORDS...

"WHATEVER YOU DO, YOU MUST NOT USE THIS LITTLE GOLDEN KEY."

I COULD ALMOST SEE HIS LIPS MOVE. ALMOST SMELL HIS BREATH.

"IT OPENS THE DOOR AT THE END OF THE LONG GALLERY."

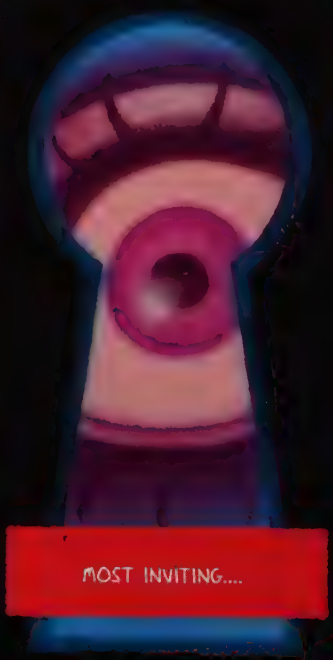
"FOR IF YOU DO, YOU WILL NOT ESCAPE THE FULL FORCE OF MY WRATH."

SOMETHING IN ME MADE ME CONTINUE ...

I WOULDN'T HAVE CALLED IT CURIOSITY ...

THIS LITTLE KEY.

THE KEYHOLE SEEMED MOST INVITING...


MOST INVITING....

THE KEY SEEMED TO FIT THE LOCK PERFECTLY.

I TURNED THE KEY, AND WITH A CLICK, THE DOOR OPENED.
CLICK!

AFTER THE BRIGHTNESS OF THE LONG CORRIDOR, MY EYES WERE UNABLE TO ADJUST TO THE DARK
AT LEAST AT FIRST
THEN I SAW WHAT WAS INSIDE!

THE FLOOR WAS COVERED IN CLOTTED BLOOD...

ATTACHED TO THE WALLS WERE BLUEBEARD'S WIVES,
HANGING THERE BEFORE ME.

IN MY PANIC I LOST MY HEAD.
I LOST MY HEAD AND I DROPPED THE KEY!

I PICKED IT UP...

LOCKED THE DOOR SHUT BEHIND ME...

AND RAN AWAY FROM THE FORBIDDEN CHAMBER AS FAST AS I COULD!

BUT THE KEY WAS A FAIRY...
A FAIRY KEY...
AND IT WAS STAINED IN BLOOD!
AND NO MATTER...
HOW MUCH I SCRUBBED...
THE BLOOD...
KEPT REAPPEARING.

AFTER WHAT SEEMED LIKE HOURS I GAVE UP
I PUT THE WRETCHED THING IN STRAW FROM THE HORSES' STABLES, AND LEFT IT TO SOAK UP THE TELL-TALE BLOOD

EACH TIME I TURNED THE KEY OVER...
THE BLOOD...
RETURNED!
IT WAS USELESS.

OH, MY HEART! YOU STARTLED ME!
MY HEART BEGAN TO BEAT FASTER AND FASTER - MY HANDS TREMBLING, MY THROAT DRY, MY HEAD SWAM, AND I FOUND IT HARD TO BREATHE.
I BECAME UNABLE TO SPEAK.

WHEN THE WORDS FINALLY CAME, THEY DID NOT SEEM LIKE MY OWN.
SOMEHOW I MANAGED TO SAY SOMETHING, ANYTHING, TO GAIN TIME.
I THOUGHT YOU WERE AWAY ON BUSINESS ...
URGENT BUSINESS?
ISN'T THAT WHAT YOU SAID?
MY BUSINESS WAS CONCLUDED ON THE ROAD MUCH QUICKER THAN I THOUGHT.
DO YOU HAVE MY KEYS?

WHY I CAN SEE
THAT THE LITTLE GOLDEN
ONE IS MISSING...
I CAN SEE
THAT
FROM HERE.
AND ALREADY I KNOW THAT
YOU HAVE SEALED
YOUR OWN FATE...
FOR YOU HAVE DONE EXACTLY
THE ONE THING I TOLD YOU
NOT TO DO.

OH, NO! I HAVE DONE NOTHING OF THE SORT! I MUST HAVE DETACHED THE GOLDEN KEY FROM THE BUNDLE AND LEFT IT ON THE DRESSING TABLE...
FOR I KNEW I WOULD NEVER USE IT.
WELL THEN! BRING IT TO ME AT ONCE!
AND I RAN TO FIND MY SISTER ANNE...

SOMEHOW I MANAGES TO FIND ANNE
BUT I COULDN'T SHAKE HER OUT OF HER TRANCE
ANNE!
ANNE!
ANNE!
ANNE!
WAKE UP!

ANNE!
WAKE UP!
ANNE!

ANNE!
WAKE UP!
ANNE!
WAKE UP!

SLAP!
EVE!
I'D MANAGED TO BRING MY SISTER BACK...
THE BLOOD BOND BETWEEN TWO SISTERS, OUR LOVE, PROVED STRONGER THAN ANY EVIL SPELL.

HELP ME, ANNE! BLUEBEARD MEANS TO KILLS ME!
HE KILLED HIS WIVES AND NOW HE'S GOING TO KILL ME!
STILL, ANNE WAS TERRIFIED.
HELP YOU?
BLUEBEARD?
I COULDN'T! I CANNOT!
COME ON! YOU HAVE TO HELP ME!
WE HAVE NO CHOICE!
QUICK! TO THE TOWER!
HE FRIGHTENS ME HALF TO DEATH!
THE VERY THOUGHT OF HIM!
THE VERY THOUGHT OF HIS WIVES!

I IMPLORED MY SISTER TO CLIMB TO THE TOWER AND LOOK TO SEE IF HELP WAS ARRIVING.
ANNE! SISTER ANNE! DO YOU SEE ANYONE COMING?
I SEE... I SEE...
I SEE NOTHING BUT THE FULL MOON OVER THE BLACK FOREST ...

ANNE!
SISTER ANNE!
DO YOU SEE
ANYONE
COMING?
I SEE...
I SEE...
I SEE
NOTHING BUT
THE CLOUDS
ROLLING ACROSS
THE SKY
...

ANNE!
SISTER ANNE!
DO YOU SEE
ANYONE
COMING?
I SEE
...
I SEE
...

I SEE OUR TWO BROTHERS AND TOM APPROACHING!

BANG!
BANG!
BANG!

?!?
!!!

STILL, AS I WRITE THESE WORDS,
MY HANDS TREMBLE, WHEN I
RECALL THE DREADFUL CASTLE.

AS BLUEBEARD'S WIFE, I INHERITED HIS VAST FORTUNE...
... AND THERE WAS MORE THAN ENOUGH...
... TO SHARE AROUND THE VILLAGE.
WE WOULD NEVER GO HUNGRY AGAIN.

AFTER BLUEBEARD DIED, EVEN THE ENCHANTED FOREST BECAME WELCOMING IN ITS OWN WAY.
BIRDS BEGAN NESTING IN ITS BRANCHES, AND PEOPLE CAME FROM AFAR TO SEE THE FLOWERS IN BLOOM.

TOM AND I WENT ON A LONG JOURNEY.
WE TRAVELLED... AND EXPLORED THE WORLD...
... AND WE FULFILLED OUR DREAMS...
... TOGETHER.

Photo credit Bob McDevitt

About the authors:

Metaphrog are Sandra Marrs (art) and John Chalmers (words), winners of the Sunday Herald Scottish Culture Awards Best Visual Artist 2016.They have received multiple Eisner Award nominations and critical acclaim for their Louis series, and Louis – Night Salad was Highly Commended for the Scottish Children's Book Awards in 2011. They were writers in Residence at the Edinburgh International Book Festival 2015 and regularly travel to talk about their work and the creative process at festivals, schools, libraries and museums. Previous books published by Papercutz include THE RED SHOES AND OTHER TALES and THE LITTLE MERMAID (Excelsior Award Junior winner 2018). They live and work in Glasgow, Scotland.

Visit their website wwww.metaphrog.com and follow them on Twitter @metaphrog

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